

THE 1961 ANDRÉS BELLO AWARD:  
WILLIAM FAULKNER'S ORIGINAL ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

by

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THREE years after William Faulkner's death, Random House published in 1965 what was intended to be a complete compilation entitled *Essays, Speeches, & Public Letters by William Faulkner*, edited by James B. Meriwether. However, the volume failed to include a formal acceptance speech Faulkner had delivered on Thursday morning, April 6, 1961, in Caracas, Venezuela: a three-paragraph address acknowledging receipt of the Order of Andrés Bello, that country's most prestigious civilian award.

This omission would go unredressed until 1974 when two separate publications would attempt to complete the record. The first of these, appearing in March 1974, was Joseph Blotner's two-volume *Faulkner: A Biography*. In his chapter containing a detailed description of Faulkner's two-week sojourn in Venezuela in April 1961, and referring to Faulkner's receipt of the Order of Andrés Bello, Blotner recorded that as Faulkner "began to read from a sheet of paper, the audience listened intently. He was reading a Spanish translation of his one-page acceptance speech."<sup>1</sup>

Without suggesting that the Spanish translation, its words, its phraseology, might have been attributable to anyone other than William Faulkner, Blotner concluded his account with a lengthy excerpt in English of Faulkner's climactic third paragraph, the origin of this English version not being identified.<sup>2</sup> For a reader to assume Faulkner's authorship of the Spanish translation might be only too plausible since Faulkner had made a similar gesture in New Orleans when he delivered, entirely in French, his acceptance speech in November 1951 on the occasion of receiving the Legion of Honor award. In thus himself penning his Legion of Honor speech directly into French, Faulkner not only bypassed the assistance of an intermediary, but, more significantly, had transmitted his thoughts originally and unalterably into foreign-language patterns of written speech. Indeed although only approximating competency in both written and spoken expression, Faulkner's command of French was far superior to that of Spanish for which he demonstrated no aptitude in written form and little more in verbal fluency. To accomplish in Caracas a result comparable to that he had effected in New Orleans, Faulkner actually required a translator to take his words from English into an equivalent Spanish text which might approximate his desired expressions and from which he might read in the native language of his presenters: the ultimate goodwill gesture.

1. The notes accompanying pages 1779-86 detailing Faulkner's Venezuelan trip in April 1961 appear on pages 213-214 of the Notes section of the second volume. Blotner cites "Charles Harner, American Embassy, Caracas, to Dept. of State, 27 Apr. 1961; Hugh Jencks, 'Report to the North American Association on the Visit of Mr. Faulkner' " as his sources for the description of events and the specific award ceremony. But he does not date the Jencks' report (it was May 10, 1961) and, as remarked below, he does not document the source of his quotation in English from the speech.

2. In the One-Volume Edition in 1984 of his more comprehensive *Faulkner: A Biography* Blotner condenses all reference to the speech in one sentence, without quotation: "After Faulkner read his short, graceful acceptance speech—in Spanish—he took from his buttonhole the prized rosette of the Legion of Honor and replaced it with that of the Order of Andrés Bello."

In August 1974, following Blotner's biography, James B. Meriwether added the complete English translation from the Spanish made by Muna Lee (from which Blotner had quoted<sup>3</sup>) to an otherwise exclusive gathering of essays and articles previously published in Summer "Faulkner" numbers of the *Mississippi Quarterly*. This *Faulkner Miscellany* in fact printed on pp. 164-166 two distinct versions, one in Spanish and the other the Lee English version. The accompanying headnote included the following information, all that was known at the time:

On April 6, 1961, in Caracas, William Faulkner received from the Venezuelan government the Order of Andrés Bello, first class. He made his speech of acceptance in Spanish. It was published in the Caracas newspaper *El Universal* April 7, 1961, p. 5, and that text is reprinted here.<sup>4</sup>

Faulkner's original English version has apparently disappeared, and who translated it into Spanish is not known. However, at a later date Miss Muna Lee, a Foreign Service officer who was also a poet, made a translation back into English, which is given here.

Had it not been for the very recent recovery of Faulkner's original single-page holograph draft of his Andrés Bello Acceptance Speech, Faulkner's authentic words, specific turns of phrase, his measures, and sensibility itself would perhaps never have been known.

While visiting Victoria Fielden Johnson, daughter of William and Victoria Franklin Fielden, Faulkner's son-in-law and step-daughter, his hosts on that 1961 trip to Caracas, Venezuela, I discovered among family effects various documents relating to that two-week period in Faulkner's life.<sup>5</sup> Of particular significance was a typed letter dated April 4, 1961, bearing the official seal of "The Foreign Service of the United States" on its letterhead. Written by Cultural Attaché Cecil L. Sanford to Faulkner, it accompanied a package delivered to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Fielden where Faulkner was staying; the package, as the letter stated, contained various Faulkner titles in Spanish translation which the author might wish to present personally to Sr. Rómulo Gallegos. On the verso of this letter was Faulkner's three-paragraph pencil holograph draft of the speech he subsequently delivered two days after the date affixed to the letter.

From the six minor strikeovers and only one circled five-word phrase Faulkner had shifted slightly from the beginning of one to the end of a contiguous sentence, it would appear that the composition had given its author very little difficulty. A plausible conjecture might suggest that having written this brief piece, Faulkner easily could have dictated from this clean draft to his interpreter Hugh Jencks the contents of what would become a speech translated with relative literalness into Spanish. Likewise, in a matter of a half hour, Jencks could have retyped his Spanish transcription into ribbon and multiple carbon copies and handed them over to Faulkner for study. Indeed, Jencks also might have coached Faulkner in his pronunciation prior to making his Thursday morning speech at the Ministry of Education. Having delivered his speech in Spanish, Faulkner could have passed along to *El Universal's* reporter in attendance for publication his own ribbon copy of the Spanish translation by Jencks from which he had just read. A carbon copy of this speech in Spanish was in the same group of effects containing the original Faulkner holograph, just one sheet below it in a massive stack of related documents.

3. In a phone conversation I had with Joseph Blotner on 6/18/85 he very kindly confirmed that in October 1972 he had supplied Meriwether with a xerox copy of Muna Lee's two-page undated translation of Faulkner's Andrés Bello speech from the Spanish. He also quoted to me the following note Muna Lee had penned at the end of page 2 of her translation: "This is my attempted translation. It is wholly unauthorized: Mr. Faulkner never saw it. Perhaps Mrs. Faulkner and Mrs. Summers would be willing to go over it and give it his turn of phrase. If they would not be willing to do so, and disapprove its present form, please destroy it. M. L."

4. The reprint of the Spanish translation actually created some incorrect variations in punctuation, spelling, accent marks, and pronoun correspondence from the text as printed in *El Universal*; more seriously, it allowed to go unrestored almost half of the penultimate sentence apparently dropped by the American typesetter.

5. I am indebted to Victoria Fielden Johnson for graciously welcoming me on my visit to her in Cape Coral, Florida, from May 20-24, 1985, and for letting me inspect and acquire various documents, letters, manuscripts, and photographs relating to William Faulkner and his family which formerly had belonged to her parents, Mr. and Mrs. William Fielden.

The first complete and accurately transcribed Spanish version of the typescript of the text Faulkner delivered in Caracas, Venezuela, on April 6, 1961, appears below. Following it, making its debut in its original English version, is William Faulkner's own acceptance speech for the Andrés Bello Award.<sup>6</sup> I have placed in square brackets and set off by the notation "*del.*" all words which Faulkner deleted in pencil by means of strikeovers. Fortunately, English-language readers need rely no longer on a twice-removed rendition of this speech; its recovery and present publication assure a reliable text, one which its author would have delivered had he chosen to do so in English.<sup>7</sup>

El artista, quiéralo o no, descubre con el tiempo que ha llegado a dedicarse a seguir un solo camino, un solo objetivo, del cual no puede desviarse. Esto es: tiene que tratar por todos los medios y con todo el talento que tenga—su imaginación, su propia experiencia y sus poderes de observación—poner en una forma más duradera que su instante de vida frágil y efímero—en la pintura, la escultura, la música o en un libro—lo que él ha experimentado durante su breve período de existencia: la pasión y la esperanza, lo bello, lo trágico, lo cómico del hombre débil y frágil, pero a la vez indómito; del hombre que lucha y sufre y triunfa en medio de los conflictos del corazón humano, de la condición humana. A él no le toca solucionar la disyuntiva ni espera sobrevivirla excepto en la forma y el significado—y las memorias que representan e invocan—del mármol, la tela, la música y las palabras ordenadas que, algún día, tendrá que dejar como su testimonio.

Esta es, sin duda, su inmortalidad, tal vez la única que le sea concedida. Quizá el mismo impulso que le condujera a esa dedicación, no era más que el simple deseo de dejar grabadas en la puerta del olvido, por la cual todos tenemos que pasar algún día, las palabras "Lalo estuvo aquí".

Así pues, estando yo aquí, en este día de hoy, siento como si hubiera ya tocado esa inmortalidad. Porque yo, un extraño aldeano que seguía en un lugar muy distante, esa dedicación, ese afán de intentar capturar y fijar así, por un momento en unas páginas, la verdad de la esperanza del hombre en el medio de las complejidades de su corazón, he recibido aquí en Venezuela la acolada que dice, en esencia: "Su dedicación no fué en vano. Lo que buscaba y encontró e intentó capturar fué la verdad".

The artist, whether he would have chosen so or not, finds that he has [become *del.*] <been> dedicated to a single course and one from which he will never escape. This is, he tries, with every means in his possession, his imagination, experience and observation, to put into some more durable form than his own fragile and ephemeral life—in paint or music or marble or the covers of a book—that which he has learned in his brief spell of breathing—the passion and hope, the beauty and horror and humor [*—ov.,*] of frail and fragile and indomitable man struggling and suffering and triumphing [in the human cond *del.*] amid the conflicts of his own heart, in the human condition. He is not to solve this dilemma nor does he even hope to survive it save in the shape and significance, the memories, of the marble and paint and music and ordered words which [to *del.*] someday he must leave behind him.

6. The important differences between the Faulkner holograph original and the Lee translation from the Spanish may be illustrated by quotation from Miss Lee's opening sentence versus Faulkner's: "The artist, whether or not he wishes it, discovers with the passage of time that he has come to pursue a single path, a single objective, from which he cannot deviate." Some of the differences derive, of course, as much from the Spanish version as from the translator, although these deviations account for very few of the major distortions attributable to Muna Lee's rendition. One such difference does occur, however, in the following version of Miss Lee's second paragraph: "This undoubtedly is his immortality; it may be, the only immortality that will be granted him. Perhaps the very impulse which led him to that dedication was nothing more than the single desire to leave carved upon the portal of forgetfulness through which *all of us must some day pass* [emphasis added] the words 'He passed this way.'" The phrase in italics represents a transposition from singular to plural pronouns committed by the original translator from English into Spanish, not the reverse as is generally the case in carrying across the relatively literal Spanish translation into English. The final sentence in Miss Lee's version goes, ". . . striving to capture and thus fix for a moment on some pages the truth of man's hope amidst the complexities of his heart, have received here in Venezuela the accolade which says in essence: 'What he sought and found and tried to capture was Truth.'"

7. I wish to acknowledge my appreciation to Jill Faulkner Summers for allowing me to make public the Spanish and English texts of Faulkner's acceptance speech and all other items in my Faulkner collection in intervening scholarly publications which call attention to the multi-volume series, *Faulkner: A Comprehensive Guide to the Brodsky Collection*, edited by Louis Daniel Brodsky and Robert W. Hamblin, and in which subsequently they will appear.

This of course is his immortality, perhaps the only one. Perhaps the very drive which has compelled him to that dedication was simply the desire to leave [written *del.*] inscribed beside that final door into oblivion through which he first must pass, the words 'Kilroy was here.'

So, as I stand here today, I have already tasted that immortality. That I, a country-bred [w *del.*] alien [from thousands of miles away *del.*] who followed that dedication thousands of miles away, to seek and try to capture and imitate for a moment in a handful of printed pages, the truth of man's hope in the human dilemma, have received here in Venezuela the official accolade which [*sic*] says in effect [Yes. What you *del.*] found and tried to imitate, was truth. [*transferred by guideline to end of passage*] Your [search *del.*] <dedication> was not spent in vain. What you sought and [found . . . truth. *brought down by guideline*]